

Council Bluffs Considers Buying Flooded Land

COUNCIL BLUFFS, Iowa (AP) — Council Bluffs is considering buying some property that was flooded by the Missouri River over the summer.

The *Daily Nonpareil* newspaper says the City Council on Monday will vote on the initial proposal of getting federal funds to buy the properties in two areas near the river.

Building inspector Steve Carmichael says there are over 45 homes and other structures that are damaged beyond repair and they need to be demolished. He says they're in a floodway, not protected by a levee.

The city is working on a grant application to the Federal Emergency Management Agency for buyouts. Local governments must provide 15 percent of the amount requested.

Man Dragged More Than 1 Mile In Hit-And-Run

LEXINGTON, Neb. (AP) — Authorities say a central Nebraska man was dragged underneath a vehicle for more than a mile before the driver left the man behind to die.

The Dawson County Sheriff's office says Friday that investigators determined 36-year-old Domingo Lujan (LOO'-hahn) Jr., of Oxford, was dragged for about 1 1/4 miles in the hit-and-run crash.

Lujan's body was discovered near an intersection east of Lexington early Tuesday.

The sheriff's office says Lujan's death is being investigated as a crime. An autopsy shows he died of blunt force trauma.

Fremont Wins Water Tasting Contest

FREMONT, Neb. (AP) — Fremont still has the best tasting water in the state, according to a statewide municipal contest.

The *Fremont Tribune* says Friday the city won the best drinking water competition for the second straight year.

The third annual taste test was held during the Nebraska Section American Water Works Association annual conference in Kearney in November. Other entries came from water supplies in Beatrice, Lincoln, the Omaha Metropolitan Utilities District, Norfolk and Seward.

Fremont is now in the running for the national contest.

Water and sewer superintendent Larry Andreasen says Fremont's well field draws from an aquifer that flows from North Dakota. He says the well field is not close to any farm fields and is planted in native grasses.

Lawmakers Suggest Coal Plant Alternatives

LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — Two Nebraska lawmakers say a \$1.5 billion plan to retrofit a coal plant will increase electricity rates, and has failed to fully consider energy alternatives.

Sens. Heath Mello of Omaha and Ken Haar of Malcolm released a letter Friday to the Nebraska Public Power District. The senators raised concerns about a plan to upgrade the 30-year-old, coal-fired Gerald Gentleman station in Sutherland.

The senators said the proposal has not received enough public input, and called for a review that would be available to ratepayers, industrial users and other stakeholders.

The district's board is scheduled to vote on the issue on Jan. 13. Mello and Haar urged board members to delay the vote to allow for the public review.

Vehicular Homicide Convict Free Man For Now

RAPID CITY (AP) — A South Dakota man convicted of vehicular homicide and battery 10 years ago is a free man while his case goes through the appeals process.

The *Rapid City Journal* reports that Oakley Engesser was released from a minimum security prison in Rapid City on Thursday, on the order of U.S. District Chief Judge Karen Schreier.

The 52-year-old Engesser of Belle Fourche (bell-FOOSH') is serving 25 years in prison for a July 2000 traffic crash on Interstate 90 that killed one person and injured two others. Schreier concluded in October that Engesser's attorney was ineffective.

Task Force To Focus On Teen Driving

PIERRE (AP) — South Dakota officials plan to spend the next year reviewing statistics and laws affecting teenage drivers to prepare recommendations for potential changes to the 2013 Legislature.

The Task Force on Teen Driving Safety was created by the last Legislature and will start its assignment with a Thursday meeting in Fort Pierre. The group will examine teen-driving data, including statistics on traffic citations, crashes, injuries and deaths; study driver-education data available to teens; and examine policies that might thwart efforts to improve teen-driving safety.

Director of Highway Safety Lee Axdahl says the goal is to get an accurate picture of teen driving because too many young drivers are involved in crashes that result in injuries or death.

Eleutian Technology Opens Rapid City Center

RAPID CITY (AP) — A company that provides English lessons around the globe through video conference technology has opened a center in Rapid City and is looking to hire about 100 teachers.

Wyoming-based Eleutian Technology so far has trained 14 teachers and has nine others in training. But human resources director Rachel Casteel tells the Rapid City Journal that applications have been slow for several reasons including low unemployment and the holiday season.

Eleutian earlier this year opened a center in Spearfish.

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Neb. Lawmakers Question \$100K Grant To Farm Group

BY GRANT SCHULTE
Associated Press

LINCOLN, Neb. — State money awarded to a Nebraska farm coalition that was formed to fight an animal welfare group is drawing scrutiny from lawmakers, who question why Attorney General Jon Bruning awarded the money from a cash pool intended for environmental issues.

Bruning announced the \$100,000 grant this week to "We Support Agriculture," a coalition created to promote farming in the midst of what it perceives as threats to Nebraska's agriculture industry. Bruning praised the group in a statement and encouraged an effort to fight the Humane Society of the United States, a national group that recently opened an office in Omaha.

"In Nebraska, agriculture is more than a resource — it's a way of life," Bruning said.

"I'm proud to support efforts to protect the cornerstone of our state economy from the actions of extremist groups like the Humane Society of the United States."

Bruning, a Republican, has launched a primary bid to challenge incumbent Democrat Ben Nelson in the 2012 U.S. Senate race.

Some rural lawmakers and agriculture groups have voiced concern that the U.S. Humane Society, which has pushed for stricter livestock welfare rules in other states, may try to bring the fight to Nebraska.

Joe Maxwell, the Humane Society's rural issues director, said the group will not pursue any ballot initiatives aimed at farming, and does not plan to propose farm- or animal-related legislation this year. Maxwell said the group opened the Nebraska office to help small farms gain access to markets and compete with large-scale operations.

Two state lawmakers and an environmen-

tal group questioned whether it's appropriate to use money from the environmental fund to finance the efforts of a private, pro-agriculture group.

"It strikes me as odd, particularly when this coalition doesn't have any record on environmental issues," said Ken Winston, the Nebraska Sierra Club's policy advocate. "It also seems odd if this money is going to an entity that has any kind of political purpose."

State Sen. Ken Haar of Malcolm said his staff is investigating what criteria are in place for groups to receive money from the fund. Haar, a prominent environmental advocate, said he may draft a bill for the regular session if he deems the standards too broad.

"That's public money," said Haar, a Democrat. "It seems strange that a government official could just hand it out at their own discretion. I think we need to find out more about it."

Ranking Places Several Dakota Cities Among Coldest

BY KRISTI EATON
Associated Press

SIoux FALLS — Let's face it: Anyone who survives a winter in the Dakotas deserves an award. A T-shirt, maybe?

Er, make that a sweatshirt.

With temperatures already hitting the single digits, there's no denying that it's mighty cold out — and we're just getting started. So it's little surprise that a recent online ranking claims that six of the eight coldest cities in the country are in North Dakota and South Dakota.

In fact, John Martin, warning coordination meteorologist at the National Weather Service in Bismarck, thinks there should be even more North Dakota cities among the Daily Beast's list of 25 coldest cities. The list, which has made the rounds on Twitter and Facebook this week, ranks Grand Forks, Bismarck and Fargo, N.D., second through fourth, respectively.

"Minot and Williston would probably beat out Bismarck for cold, and only because they get the cold air first," Martin said.

The only place colder than

North Dakota, according to the Daily Beast's list? Fairbanks, Alaska.

Three South Dakota cities also made the list. Watertown, Aberdeen and Sioux Falls were all noted for their bone-chilling temperatures.

The Daily Beast posting indicates it used data from the 2009 winter for the rankings, but it's not clear why its tally appears at odds with meteorologists' expectations — or what criteria were used when determining what constitutes a city.

Minot has a population of about 41,000, while Williston has about 15,000 residents, according to the 2010 census. Both Wasilla, Alaska, with a population of less than 8,000, and St. Albans, Vermont — population 7,000 — made the top 25.

The Daily Beast did not respond to an email seeking clarification.

Asked if he had recommendations for someone wanting to visit North Dakota at this time of year, Martin was quick to answer: "I recommend they come in the summer months."

Association Says Foreclosure Rate Should Drop Soon

BY DIRK LAMMERS
Associated Press

SIoux FALLS — Recent real estate mortgage data indicates that South Dakota is on the verge of bringing down its foreclosure rate, the head of the South Dakota Bankers Association said.

CoreLogic, a real estate research firm, said the rate of South Dakota foreclosures among outstanding mortgage loans rose to 1.4 percent in September, but the mortgage delinquency rate dropped to 2.63 percent.

Curt Everson, the association president, said a turnaround typically begins with a drop in the delinquency rate. And with employment picking up both in South Dakota and Sioux Falls, the state's largest city, the foreclosure rate should begin to decline as well, he said.

"One kind of follows the other," Everson said.

In Sioux Falls, the September foreclosure rate climbed to 1.48 percent, from 1.25 percent in September 2010. Two years earlier, the rate was below 1 percent.

But the rate of mortgage

delinquency decreased in September, with 2.85 percent of mortgage loans 90 days or more delinquent compared to 2.93 percent for the same period last year.

Matt Larson, president of the Realtors Association of the Sioux Empire, said recent job announcements by Citibank and Premier Bankcard vowing to add positions in Sioux Falls are encouraging and should boost the housing market.

"A lot of what drives it is employment," Larson said. "A lot of what it is is people's attitude, and I think right now it's really pretty darn good in the area."

Everson said South Dakota still fares better than most states and that the foreclosure rates in South Dakota and Sioux Falls are far below the national average of 3.48 percent.

"For each individual it's not a pleasant thing to go through to basically not be able to make your house payments and lose your home through foreclosure," he said. "But from an aggregate sense those numbers are certainly not at an alarming level."

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